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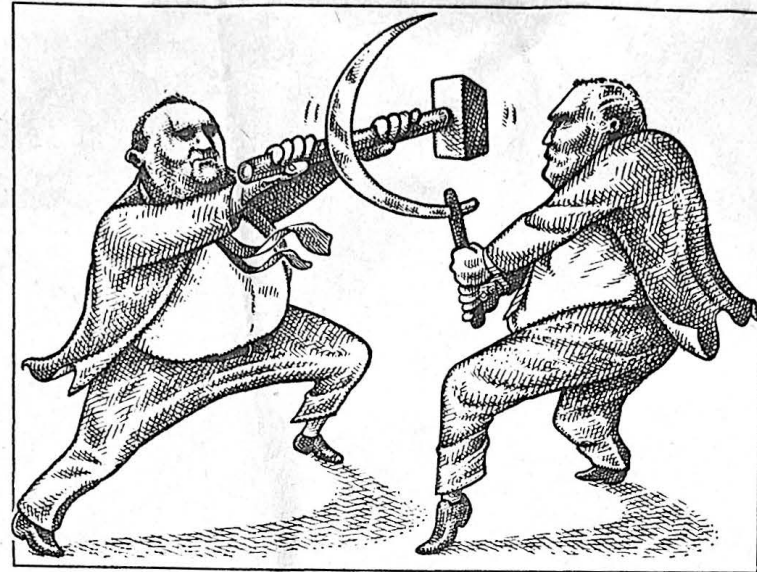
Eastern Europe: Ammunition for Moscow's Wars

Nowhere has the East European upheaval been followed with more amazement than in the Soviet Union. The Kremlin had, after all, been the sire of the ousted regimes. It had, in earlier days, used brute force to prevent just such risings. It had argued that these were all fraternal nations subject to the same immutable laws of history, and the East European states had formed the core of the Warsaw Pact, which supposedly ensured the security of the U.S.S.R.

The momentous events—from the accession of the Solidarity-led government in Poland and the dissolution of the old Communist Party in Hungary, to the huge rallies in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, which ultimately toppled their governments—have received extensive coverage in the Soviet media. To be sure, they are not advertised as a turn to capitalism. Nor do they feature anti-Russian or anti-Soviet sentiments expressed abroad. But the Soviet television viewer and astute newspaper reader have a pretty good idea of what is happening in, and to, the “socialist commonwealth.”

Not many Soviet observers seem to have understood that the crucial precondition was Mikhail Gorbachev's signaling to the East Europeans that they were on their own. Deprived of Moscow's backing—and firepower—the local regimes had no choice but to respond to popular demands at home (or resist them and, as in Romania, succumb to them). As on other occasions, a small move by the Gorbachev leadership produced vast unintended consequences: it brought the East European edifice down.

It is significant that the Soviet public has not panicked at this news. Some of this is because of the sense that there is now no great danger to the Soviet state lurking in the West. It is reinforced by the higher priority of domestic concerns. And in some quarters there



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is relief to be rid of the responsibility for the often unmanageable East Europeans. There are few “true believers” left who are shocked by the evidence that the impossible is happening: history is moving “backward,” communism is forced to retreat, and the famous correlation of forces is tilting against Soviet-style socialism.

Beyond this first reaction, Soviet responses to the East European drama are badly divided. While the reformers view it with pride and hope, their domestic opponents point with alarm and chagrin. The more radical advocates of change want Eastern Europe to become the Soviet Union's model. In the debates over Article 6 of the Soviet constitution—legalizing a multiparty system, which Gorbachev now indicates he could accept—the experience of the neighboring states provides lessons on how it could be done. A prominent academic-diplomatic commentator, Vladimir Lukin, writes that what has occurred in Eastern Europe is “a series of sweeping antitotalitarian democratic revolutions,” and, he continues, the Soviet reaction “has been most

reassuring. We seem to be learning—better late than never—to tell the interests of genuine national security from a desire to keep ‘our people’ in power in neighboring East European capitals.”

For the Soviet opponents of reform, however, the East European crises add to the general alarm about the drift of events. They are deemed to be inimical to Soviet interests, politically and militarily. They are the characteristic product of Gorbachev's pussyfooting policies, the inevitable outcome of the same program of glasnost, pluralism and democratization that his coalition has launched at home. For them, there is no hesitation in telling “who has lost Eastern Europe” and in warning the Soviet party bosses and uniformed brass what awaits them if indeed Eastern Europe is to be a model for Moscow's future.

While they do not share Beijing's nostalgia for Nicolae Ceausescu, they do (much as their elders had done 30 years earlier) use the Chinese as proxies for conveying in “internal” (but carefully leaked) documents the view that Moscow is

ultimately responsible for what has occurred. To the Russian ultraconservatives, increasingly well organized and preparing to do battle with the reformers, Gorbachevian complicity in the East European debacle is further evidence of his betrayal of all they hold dear: he has sold out the imperatives of Leninism, the integrity of the Soviet state and its international posture and security. They are also alarmed by the extent to which workers have made common cause with the students, by the ease with which the crowds in Leipzig and Prague, in Sofia and Bucharest managed to bring down the incumbents, and by the fact that on more than one occasion the army has sided with the people.

To be sure, they know—and we know—that conditions in the Soviet Union are significantly different from those in its erstwhile client states. The East European regimes were imposed from abroad, while the Soviet regime is indigenous. In ways the East European do not share, many Russians fear a weakening of their state and its center (partly because of the complicated nationality problems and partly for reasons of international prestige). In its longer time, the Soviet system has created greater vested interests in its preservation than the Polish or Hungarian systems did. Soviet attitudes toward the West are far more mixed. Gorbachev has launched some of the changes from above that the people in Prague and Bucharest demand from below.

The East European events do not provide a precise model for what is likely to happen in the U.S.S.R. But this does not diminish the extent to which both the Soviet left and the Soviet right use these events as ammunition in their increasingly bitter arguments over the fate of perestroika and its architects.

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